

Dialogue with Nature





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Landscape and Literature
in Nineteenth-Century America

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The Corcoran Gallery of Art
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Introduction

One of the richest aspects of the Corcoran Gallery of Art is its collection of nineteenth-century American landscape paintings. These paintings are visually inspiring and also bring to mind the connections between art, literature, and thought which characterized this period of intense cultural development and evolving national identity. *Dialogue with Nature* is meant to draw out these connections and to discuss them in the context of individual works at the Corcoran. So much was going on in artistic, literary, and intellectual circles in the nineteenth century that no chronological or linear description does justice to the constant interchange of influences. But a brief introduction to the people, places, and persuasions which characterized America from the 1820s through the 1870s will shed some light on this complex and enriched period.

It is instructive to start with the premise on which both art and literature turned during this time: that America needed to establish a unique culture. In the first decades of the nineteenth century, the United States was still largely European in its cultural life. The book trade was monopolized by English best sellers, such as Walter Scott's *Waverly Novels* (1814-31), and the models for American landscape painting derived from English topographical style and the works of such European landscape masters as Claude Lorrain and Gaspar Dughet (known as Poussin). Even while Americans made free use of Old World traditions in their art, the desire for an indigenous culture was strong and very much a part of everyday life. It was the subject of speeches, magazine articles, and literary essays, and it dominated the consciousness of artists and writers who sought out the truly unique features of their country. Convinced that art must be based on American subjects to avoid being derivative, they looked for what was special about America and found it in the land.

Nature had always been central to the American experience, and in the 1820s it became the darling of American arts and letters. It was promoted and befriended by a group of artists and writers whose close personal associations and shared beliefs blurred the lines between the "sister arts." This was the world of Knickerbocker New York, dominated by writers such as James Fenimore Cooper, Washington Irving, and William Cullen Bryant, and by Hudson River school artists including Thomas Cole and Asher B. Durand. Lifelong friendships developed

among many of these luminaries; for example, Bryant and Durand were close for fifty-three years, bound by a shared love of nature, culture, and country. They accompanied each other on hikes in search of picturesque locations with their mutual friend Cole, and collaborated on a short-lived periodical of prose and landscape engravings called *The American Landscape* (1830), which was devoted to the country's native terrain. Durand based at least five of his paintings on Bryant's poems, and Bryant made nature sketches after the manner of painters. These personal and creative connections, fostered by a shared dedication to American nature and culture, constituted the artistic lifeblood in New York City at this time.

New York provided numerous social occasions for exchanging ideas about American nature and culture—at such gathering spots as Fraunces Tavern, and at informal organizations around the city including the Bread and Cheese Club, the Sketch Club, and the Century Club.

Presided over by James Fenimore Cooper, the Bread and Cheese Club grew out of impromptu meetings Cooper had with friends around 1825 in the bookshop of his publisher, Charles Wiley. Later, the meetings were moved to the elegant City Hotel, where lavish dinners were as important as the evening's discussions. The members of this club represented the literary and artistic elite of New York. And when the Bread and Cheese Club evolved into the Sketch Club, it became an even stronger magnet for artists and writers who were defining the new American aesthetic.

At meetings of the Sketch Club, New York doctors, lawyers, scientists, and ministers socialized and discussed national goals with America's leading artists and writers. During a typical meeting, the host would select a subject and the other members would draw for the next hour or so. Perhaps not unexpectedly, the subject often was taken from literature. Cole, Durand, Daniel Huntington, and John Kensett were among those who joined in the laughter, conversation, pranks, and sketching which characterized these meetings.

After Cooper left New York City for Europe in 1826, Bryant became the central figure of literary New York where his influence was enormous. Among several other memberships and offices he held in the city, Bryant was editor of the *New York Evening Post* and later a vice-president of the Metropolitan Museum of Art. He also helped establish the American Art-Union, whose regular exhibitions and lottery of American prints helped put native art in the public eye. But most importantly, Bryant was the writer of poetry which shaped Americans' romantic ideas of their country's beauty and grandeur. His nature writings became the wellspring of landscape art which focused on both the close observation and the romantic celebration of the American land.

This passion about American land and what it stood for was still strong at mid-century. Henry Wadsworth Longfellow expressed it forcefully in his novel *Kavanaugh* (1849): "We want a national literature commensurate with our mountains and rivers—commensurate with Niagara, and the Alleghenies, and the Great Lakes!" This patriotic goal fueled the ambition of many American writers and was the rallying cry of a group called Young America, formed in the 1840s to promote the goal of American cultural independence.

Andrew Fisher Bunner
(1841-1897) detail, *Two Sketches:*
Trees and Meadows, "Hudson," and
"Clavarack Creek," July 20, 1866,
pencil on paper, 13¹³/₁₆ x 9⁷/₈
inches, inscribed, center right:
Hudson July 20th/66/A.F.B.;
lower left: Clavarack Creek/July
20 66/AFB
Gift of Kate Bunner 02.9.10.



The Tenth Street Studio Building in New York City was another sign of the country's maturing culture. Designed to house about twenty artists' studios, the building was "full as a Broadway omnibus on a rainy day" by 1860, according to the art magazine *The Crayon*. Indeed, the spacious studios at West Tenth Street were shared by almost all of the leading American artists of the day: Durand, Frederic Church, John Casilear, Sanford Robinson Gifford, Albert Bierstadt, Martin Johnson Heade, and Worthington Whittredge, who kept his studio there for thirty years. It was the habit of these painters to make sketching trips during the summer, usually in each other's company, and to spend autumn through spring painting at the Studio Building. Through many years of close interaction—while painting and lunching together, swapping advice, organizing exhibitions, and sharing thoughts—this core group of artists collectively shaped the development of American landscape painting. But the American romance with landscape had lights outside New York.

In New England, another group of writers had been cultivating a more private view of nature. Massachusetts, the center of Transcendentalist writing and philosophy, was an introspective environment whose luminaries included Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau, Nathaniel Hawthorne, and Herman Melville. New England was also a place where both resident artists, such as Fitz Hugh Lane, and New York-based artists, including Church and Heade, came to paint.

To a lesser extent than in New York, clubs were formed in Massachusetts to enable artists and literati to gather informally. In the 1820s weekly meetings of the Wednesday Evening Club convened in Boston at the house of painter Henry Sargent. After 1855, the Saturday Club attracted Longfellow, Emerson, Oliver Wendell Holmes, and Harvard scientist Louis Agassiz to its monthly meetings. There were also numerous Transcendentalist discussion groups and communities. The goal of the communities was to provide an idyllic retreat where one could escape from worldly cares while doing meaningful work in close proximity to nature. The two most famous of these utopian experiments were Fruitlands (1844-45), run by Louisa May Alcott's father, Amos Bronson Alcott, and Brook Farm (1841-47), which had over 100 associates, including Hawthorne.

More exclusive still was the so-called "Philosopher's Camp" organized by William Stillman, a landscapist who studied with Church, associated with John Ruskin in England, and helped found *The Crayon* (1855-61), one of America's first art journals. While making landscape sketches in the Adirondacks, Stillman was befriended by the rustic guides and woodsmen of the area who instructed him in the practical aspects of nature—how to paddle a canoe and use an axe, for example. This, he decided, was an experience his cultivated friends needed to share. The following year, Stillman invited a group of renowned New Englanders from a wide range of disciplines to a campsite near Follansbee Pond. Each member of the group was assigned his own guide, and each made a singular contribution to the experience. Louis Agassiz gave the group lessons in botany, geology, anatomy, and entymology, using the examples at hand. James Russell Lowell recited poetry and fired off witty remarks. Emerson made trips to solitary parts of the pond where he meditated on the advantages of life so closely placed to nature.

These self-conscious attempts to understand nature and to create from it a unique culture were part of the more general American belief in the promise inherent in their land. From this commonality of interest in the American wilderness, there grew a complex web of expression which, though varied in its forms, seems at heart to rest on a belief in nature as the key to American identity. The following chapters will consider nineteenth-century American arts and letters in the spirit of their own times.

Seeing America: Traveling and Painting in the Nineteenth Century

We are so accustomed to the domesticated landscape of America that it is hard to imagine the untouched, primeval wilderness it once was. Even at the turn of the nineteenth century, Americans had seen little of their mysterious New World home. Travel on this continent was so dangerous and difficult that most people had to learn about America secondhand, from the accounts of explorers and of pioneering writers and artists who ventured into the obscure wilderness and recorded its unprecedented natural spectacles. The verbal and visual descriptions which appeared in early nineteenth-century magazines, novels, and travel books helped popularize the notion that the earth's greatest wonders awaited discovery on this vast, uncharted continent.

After 1825, steamboats, hotels, and trains radically improved travel along New York's Hudson River, and curious Americans rushed to see the land they had read so much about. The "Northern Tour" up the Hudson was soon a popular pursuit of New York City's wealthy merchants. Bearing lap dogs, novels, and a great deal of luggage, many traveled all day by steamer and four hours by stage up a precipitous hill to the Catskill Mountain House, a large and elegant hotel built on a ledge overlooking the Hudson Valley. There, amid modern amenities and in the company of friends, these elegant tourists indulged in such refinements as tea dancing and turtle soup before stepping outside into the heart of the ancient wilderness. Luxury hotels and modest boarding houses sprang up near other mountains, waterfalls, and natural springs, and gay picnics were held in the "Elysian Fields" of Hoboken, New Jersey, and on cultivated grounds near Philadelphia and Boston (see illustration page 24). By mid-century, nature had become fashionable.

Since tourists had first experienced the American land by reading about it, they could not help associating literary legends with their new vacationland. James Fenimore Cooper had visited the ledge on which the Catskill Mountain House was later built, and tourists delighted in his three-page description of the sublime view from this vantage point in *The Pioneers* (1823).

Local legend had adopted Washington Irving's two best-loved American tales as the region's own: sojourns from the Mountain House were often made to a woodland ravine known as "Sleepy Hollow" where "Rip van Winkle's Shanty" and "Rip

van Winkle's Glen" were located. Later in the century tourists were able to travel in such suggestively named steamboats as the "Rip van Winkle," the "Washington Irving," and the "Knickerbocker." The owners of the Mountain House encouraged such literary connections by periodically issuing a booklet entitled *The Scenery of the Catskill Mountains. As Described by Irving, Cooper, Bryant, . . . Thomas Cole, and other eminent writers* (1845-64).

* * *

Although these amateur explorers did a great deal of socializing in the American wilderness, their ostensible purpose was to appreciate nature's aesthetic qualities. The practice of critically contemplating nature as one would contemplate a man-made work of art first developed among British travelers making the Grand Tour of the continent and the picturesque tour of England. Consequently, the only standards for judging landscape were based on the scenery of the Old World, which, after centuries of planting, pruning, and enclosing, reminded Americans of a well-kept garden. The great contrast between the tame English countryside and the rough American wilderness made it difficult for a large proportion of travelers to enjoy American scenery. But travel guidebooks helped educate them in the appreciation of the American land. Published in tremendous number and variety prior to 1860, they supplied a great hodgepodge of information: history, poetry, maps, scenic engravings, and recommendations of the best hotels, the fastest transportation, and the most worthwhile landmarks. These tiny volumes also contained the author's rapturous responses to landscapes, which readers faithfully imitated during their own travels. In the 1840s, "summer books" came into vogue. These sentimental volumes contained nature essays, character sketches, and bits of native folklore collected by the authors during summer trips to the countryside.

Many of America's most prominent writers produced some form of travel literature. In the *New York Evening Post*, William Cullen Bryant described his roving through east coast mountain ranges—the Palisades, the Catskills, and the Berkshires—during which he stayed at workmen's cottages and sustained himself on biscuits and apples. Henry David Thoreau, an inveterate traveler, composed many of his writings in the form of excursions into nature. Tourists, too, were inspired to describe scenery in lengthy journals and letters written during their trips.

* * *

In many ways, travel was a boon to landscape painting. Guidebooks and summer books enhanced interest in native landscapes, and a tourist's affection for a particular spot occasionally led him to buy a picture of it. Thomas Doughty was

among the first native artists to gain popularity as a painter of American locations. Although he used a range of styles, the majority of Doughty's works, like those of Anglo-American painter Joshua Shaw (1776-1860), were executed in the picturesque mode popular in England. These paintings tended to mellow American nature, recreating it in the image of classical European landscapes. For example, though Doughty's *Autumn on the Hudson* (1850, illustration page 26) and Shaw's *The Truants* (1843) depict distinctly American scenery, their compositions derive from classical European formulas and emphasize the domestication of the land through such signs of civilization as untroubled boats, a country cottage, and relaxed human figures. This style was most appropriate for the pretty, settled areas outside of New York City and Philadelphia, but it did not reflect the untamed appearance of the rest of the country.

Joshua Shaw (1776-1860), *The Truants*, 1843, oil on canvas, 22 $\frac{7}{8}$ x 31 $\frac{1}{8}$ inches, inscribed, lower right: J. Shaw, 1843. Museum purchase through gifts of Mr. and Mrs. Brekinridge Long. 1981.66



The painter who was thought to capture best the unique aspects of wild American nature was Thomas Cole (1801-1845). In 1825, a New York merchant provided Cole with steamboat fare up the Hudson River, where he made his first sketches of remote Catskill regions. On his return, Cole painted three astonishing landscapes which portrayed dense, tangled underbrush, jagged rocks, and splintered and decaying trees. Cole's romantic paintings reminded patrons of their own walks through mountain and woodland landscapes, for he conveyed the feelings of awe experienced by those exploring the wild.

Cole's paintings won him commissions and attracted artistic followers. The first to equal Cole was Asher B. Durand (1806-1886), who in 1835 gave up a fifteen-year career as New York's leading engraver in order to paint landscapes. The small scale and intricate work required by engraving made Durand a master of closely observed detail. He pioneered the technique in America of going outdoors to make highly finished oil studies of nature's finer points—such as leaves, fungus, and bark—which were uncompromising in recreating the facts of nature. Durand's

depictions of trees were so exact that they were termed portraits, and he was occasionally requested to paint particular species in commissioned pictures.

Cole and Durand were also authors with numerous articles on art and nature to their credit. Particularly influential was Cole's 1836 "Essay on American Scenery," in which he urged painters to seek out and celebrate the mountains, lakes, waterfalls, and rivers of America. Succeeding generations of American painters turned to Cole's article as a rich source of inspiration and subject matter.

A second important document was Durand's series of "Letters on Landscape Painting," featured in 1855 and 1856 in *The Crayon*, one of America's earliest art magazines. Durand warned young painters not to study the works of other artists until they had learned the secrets of landscape painting from nature itself. Cole and Durand advised that long, solitary walks through the wilderness provided excellent opportunities for observing natural forms and processes. This was also the practice of American writers from Bryant and Irving to Hawthorne and Thoreau.

Cole and Durand won the admiration of younger artists, including Frederic Church, John Kensett, Worthington Whittredge, Jasper Cropsey, and John Casilear. Though they never formed an official association, these painters were bound by close friendships and a shared philosophy of painting. By mid-century critics recognized them as a group, dubbed the "Hudson River school" in reference to the recurrence of Hudson Valley scenery in their paintings.

In reality, the tag was misleading, for circumstances quickly pushed the painters beyond the Hudson River. By the 1840s, the town of Catskill, New York, was experiencing a daily invasion of forty steamboats carrying up to 700 passengers each. The advent of railroads increased the number of travelers, and the Erie Canal, opened in 1825, created boom towns: Rochester, New York, grew from just one house in 1810 to 13,000 residents in 1830. Amateur and professional artists were also flocking to the Catskills. Simultaneously, the demand for American landscape imagery increased and was satisfied by American paintings as well as export items: American cupboards held English-made gravy boats stamped with scenes of the Catskill Mountains, and the walls of many houses were decorated with a French wallpaper series called "Picturesque America" (1834), featuring such scenic landmarks as Niagara Falls and Virginia's Natural Bridge. An existing sample can be seen in the Diplomatic Reception room of the White House.

* * *

To experience nature in its wild and primitive state, painters had to forego fashionable areas and travel to more remote places. Casilear and Kensett, devotees of Durand, were among the younger members of the Hudson River school who spent summers after 1848 exploring New York's Adirondack region. Their paintings of Lake George, New York, captured the sublime majesty of that great mountain-lined waterway, while hinting at the trains, steamboats, and tourists already infiltrating the lake (see illustration page 30). As enthusiastic Adirondack guidebooks attracted vacationers to the area, luxury hotels and rustic campgrounds were established to accommodate them. By 1870, accessible areas of the Adirondacks, too, were tourist centers.

Farther east and north, artists explored New Hampshire (see illustration page 33) and Maine, whose highest peak, Mt. Katahdin, was visited by Thoreau and painted by Frederic Edwin Church, then America's most successful painter of spectacular landscape tableaux. Church was deeply influenced by German scientist Alexander von Humboldt, who, in his popular book *Cosmos: A Sketch of a Physical Description of the Universe* (1850), called on artists to explore the world's obscure terrains. In response, Church became the most adventurous traveler in the Hudson River school group, journeying to Labrador, Europe, Jamaica, and the Near East. Earlier, he had studied South American jungle foliage, geology, and volcanoes in preparation for paintings such as *Scenery of the Magdalena River, New Granada, South America* (1854). His exotic paintings created tremendous sensations when exhibited in New York City.

While America's best landscape painters continued to comb the Northeast during the 1830s and 1840s, writers—ranging from Irving and Bryant to dime novel hacks—went West. In the frontiers beyond the Mississippi, they found flat, empty plains—landscapes unlike anything seen before. So unsettling was the alien appearance of the western frontier that most visitors needed to associate the vast prairies and strange rock formations with previously known scenes; they duly construed resemblances to the Roman Campagna, Moorish castles, Gothic cathedrals, and Boston's Beacon Hill in the American plains. Imaginative visions such as these characterized most accounts of the West, whether in travel books, fiction, personal correspondence, or regional periodicals. Artists, too, tried to make the western landscape resemble more traditional scenes. In *Crossing the Rocky Mountains* (1854), George Douglass Brewerton (1821-1901) pictured the plains as a rolling, fertile field, dotted with picturesque clusters of rocks, plants, and tree trunks. Succeeding travelers were often disappointed to find the real plains a barren landscape which violated the canons of natural beauty, instead of the magical kingdom described in popular literature and imagery.

George Douglass Brewerton
(1829-1901), *Crossing the Rocky
Mountains*, 1854, oil on canvas, 30
x 44¼ inches, inscribed, lower
left: G. Douglass Brewerton/1854.
Gift of William Wilson Corcoran,
1869. 69.12



As they had in the rugged northeastern wilderness, travelers on the western frontier needed to adjust their expectations. For this purpose, a kind of mobile Catskill Mountain House was sponsored by the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad in 1858. For five days, aboard a train stocked with champagne, deviled crab, and a piano, fifty writers, photographers, and artists (including Durand and Kensett) scouted for striking scenery, requesting that the train be stopped on occasion so that the passengers could descend to write, sketch, or make photographs.

In the 1860s and 1870s many Hudson River school painters went West in search of the primeval wilderness they identified with the New World. Kensett, Worthington Whittredge, Sanford Robinson Gifford, and Albert Bierstadt joined scouting and surveying expeditions to the Rocky Mountains in the 1860s. The sketches they made during these trips provided the basis for paintings executed on their return to New York.

The most successful of the western painters, Albert Bierstadt (1830-1902), painted the plains and Rocky Mountains with grandeur of style and scale. He described views from a distant perspective—across a vast plain to the horizon, or from an eminence to the scene spread out below—often including small animals to indicate scale, such as the bear in *Mount Corcoran* (1875-77, illustration page 46). This was the same kind of descriptive technique used by James Fenimore Cooper in his novels. Such paintings echo Walt Whitman's expansive celebration of America's coast-to-coast splendor in *Leaves of Grass* (1855), an epic poem invigorated by the freedom of democracy and westward expansion.

These connections between art and literature persisted throughout the century and were part of a vast network of ideology and expression in which writing, the subject of the following chapter, was central.

New Expressions for a New World: American Art and Literature

American cultural nationalism found collective expression in the works of the "Knickerbockers," New York's most prominent poets, novelists, and essayists during the first quarter of the nineteenth century and the champions of aspiring American artists during the second. Although they had a deep respect for European tradition and could scarcely help relying on the conventions of the only culture they knew, most of the Knickerbockers nevertheless felt that America needed to develop its own distinctive traditions. Old World conventions could not adequately describe the New World, they warned. Instead, the new American tradition was to be based on firsthand experience.

The Knickerbockers stressed that in order to write or paint in a uniquely American way, it was necessary to determine what was unique about America. Nature was the most popular answer to this question, and so writers and painters were urged to go directly to the wilderness to celebrate the American robin and whippoorwill, rather than the English nightingale and skylark; native pines and spice bushes, rather than primrose and myrtle; the majestic Berkshire Hills, rather than the lofty Alps. By associating nature with nationalism, the Knickerbocker writers helped build an enthusiastic audience for landscape painting.

One of the first American writers to adopt native subject matter was William Cullen Bryant (1794-1878), who began his first great poem, "Thanatopsis" (1817), at the age of seventeen, only to be told that it was too good to be the work of an American. Bryant's mature poems immortalized the seemingly ordinary plants and animals familiar from his childhood in the rolling hills of Massachusetts.

By creating a repertoire of ennobled landscape imagery, Bryant and his literary disciples enticed painters to treat these subjects. In his poem "Autumn Woods" (1824), Bryant praised the forest's "giant kings, in purple and gold," and virtually every American artist painted New England's resplendent fall foliage, as if to prove the often repeated claim that the American autumn was unsurpassed in all the world. The landscape painter Jasper Cropsey (1823-1900) faithfully recreated brilliant fall colors in his trademark autumnal scenes. Leaf samples accompanied Cropsey's pictures to London as proof that the rich colors of his canvases were not exaggerations. During his tours of the Hudson River Valley in pursuit of indigenous subject matter, Thomas Cole catalogued striking scenery in a notebook he called

"Catskilliana." Less ambitious trips in search of picturesque scenery quickly became the routine of most American painters and writers.

* * *

History was considered the essence of European culture, and most picturesque European landscapes contained crumbling ruins and ancient landmarks alluding to the past. In emulation of Europe, the Knickerbockers encouraged native poets and painters to commemorate American locations of national significance (see illustration page 35). The Knickerbocker writers made it their own business to popularize tales of bygone days in America, both those they discovered and those they fabricated.

The Knickerbockers' richest source of inspiration lay just outside their New York City home in the Hudson Valley, an area endowed with the folklore of several centuries. According to Indian myths, spirits dwelled there, their personalities revealed in the natural forms of the mountain peaks and waterfalls which bore the spirits' names. Other tales were added in the seventeenth century by Dutch sailors who accounted for the Hudson's mystifying changes in weather and geography through elaborate superstitions. In the eighteenth century, ship captains on the Hudson developed a marvelous collection of supernatural Indian myths, traditional Dutch legends, and Revolutionary War stories with which they regaled their passengers.

In *The Spanish Papers* (1866), Washington Irving described his own trip up the Hudson to Albany at the age of seventeen. Lying on the ship's deck watching the Catskill mountains pass overhead—their faces magically transformed by the shifting light and atmosphere—Irving listened to an old trader who told him stories about the "hobgoblin places" nearby: Spuyten Devil Creek, the Tappan Zee, and the Devil's Dan Kammer. For the rest of his life, he remained under the spell of this "fairy region" of the Hudson.

The History of New York (1809) and *The Sketchbook* (1819) represent Irving's deliberate attempts to correct America's deficient sense of history and tradition by fusing rich, local legend with his own fantastic tales of Hudson Valley towns and natural landmarks. Through his fanciful tales, Irving haunted the woods of Tarrytown, New York, with a headless horseman and caused Catskill Mountain thunderstorms to conjure images of the ghostly game of ninepins witnessed by Rip van Winkle. The gnarled trees and dark, looming mountains of many paintings of the Hudson River may owe something to Irving's romantic evocations of the area.

Another writer who discovered hidden wonders in the American land was James Fenimore Cooper (1789-1851). A gentleman farmer in New York, Cooper made a point of rebelling against the English literary monopoly in America by writing a series of distinctively American books. Drawing on his youthful

rambles through Hudson highland forests, Cooper's five frontier romances (1823-41) trace the saga of Natty Bumppo, a solitary and fiercely independent frontiersman widely known as Leatherstocking.

Like Irving, Cooper closely associated his tales with the American land, periodically reminding readers that they could actually visit the sites of Leatherstocking's noble deeds. As fact mingled with fiction in the minds of readers, the Leatherstocking mythology was grafted to such celebrated natural attractions as Glens Falls, Ballston Spa, and Lake George, New York. No doubt the author's affecting descriptions of sublime wilderness scenery helped inspire the paintings of Lake George by John Kensett (see illustration page 30).

* * *

New York was not the only place for American literary activity; by 1850, the works of Massachusetts natives Ralph Waldo Emerson, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, and Henry David Thoreau had eclipsed the Knickerbockers, and the center of American literary activity had shifted to New England. Despite their literary inclinations, American painters did not leave New York City to be near these writers in Boston and Concord, Massachusetts. New York already had an established base of patronage, and its social tone was considered more congenial than that of the Northeast. Indeed, Knickerbocker New York was an arena for lavish dinners, gay parties, and urbane clubs where artists could mingle with deferential patrons and the personable authors of their favorite books. New England society was far less entertaining. Deeply respectful of knowledge, fascinated by theology and philosophy, the residents of Boston and Concord preferred lectures to parties. The area's writers congregated to discuss intellectual interests such as German metaphysics or the current state of religion, but in daily life they favored solitude and introspection.

New Englanders seem to have been equally idiosyncratic in their approach to nature. Whereas the Knickerbockers enjoyed the picturesque qualities of scenery and looked at landscape in terms of human activity, the writers of Massachusetts focused on the spiritual presence of nature, which they related to the human mind. New England writers diligently kept journals in which they recorded their personal reactions to nature. These spontaneous essays provided the basis for more finished literary compositions, in the same way that Hudson River school sketchbooks ultimately led to paintings.

Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882) derived his publications and lectures from journals maintained consistently from his seventeenth to his seventy-fifth year. Many of these entries were occasioned by excursions into nature, for Emerson was fond of rowing on quiet ponds and wandering through Concord's woods and fields. He viewed nature as an intermediary leading to

a higher end—the perception of the universal spirit which animates both mankind and the natural world. As Emerson declared in his first major publication, *Nature* (1836), this end could not be achieved in society due to its distortion by artificial rules; humanity could perceive its organic connection with the world only in the unspoiled wilderness, where the universal spirit revealed itself symbolically in natural forms. Thus rather than a public place where tourists socialized, nature for Emerson was a private retreat where he experienced epiphany.

* * *

A group of New England natives who became known as the Transcendentalists gathered around Emerson. Given to extravagant imaginative tendencies, they elaborated upon Emerson's speculations about nature and spirit, but only one of them thought to test the ideas in practice. This was Henry David Thoreau (1817-1862) who lived with his mentor for two years and then built a cabin of his own on Emerson's isolated property just south of Concord, near Walden Pond. While residing there from 1845 to 1847, Thoreau devoted his mornings to writing and his afternoons to scientific and symbolic speculations on the plant and animal life nearby.

The journal he kept during those years was later rewritten as *Walden* (1854), in which Thoreau outlined the frugal lifestyle which allowed him to work just six weeks a year while devoting the rest of his time to nature. Like other members of the New England group, Thoreau supported himself in part through lectures and publications. While speaking around the country, Thoreau, Emerson, and the others exposed widespread audiences to the idea of nature as a spiritual haven.

Thoreau often rowed and skated on the Concord River with Nathaniel Hawthorne (1804-1864), another Massachusetts native. From Thoreau, Hawthorne learned to be a keen observer of natural detail, but his own tales and romances were more remarkable for their symbolic conception of nature than for their naturalism. In works like *The Scarlet Letter* (1850) and "Young Goodman Brown" (1835), the troubled interior states of Hawthorne's characters were revealed materially in allusive landscape settings. Alone in the wilderness, Hawthorne's characters discovered deep truths about themselves and about mankind.

Herman Melville (1819-1891) manifested a similar symbolic approach to nature in *Moby Dick* (1851), the novel influenced by and dedicated to Hawthorne, Melville's close friend and neighbor in Lenox, Massachusetts. Both novelists were inspired by this charming rural area of the Berkshire Hills. Hawthorne watched for changes in the appearance of the mountains and surrounding countryside, and noted them in his journals. Melville dedicated his novel *Pierre* (1852) to "The Most Excellent Purple Majesty of Greylock," the great mountain near Williamstown, Massachusetts, which was beloved of both

Melville and Hawthorne. Artists, too, were inspired by the majestic purple mountains and rolling countryside of the area. Walter M. Oddie painted *Lake Near Lenox, Massachusetts* in 1850, at the same time that Melville was writing *Moby Dick* and Hawthorne was at work nearby on *The House of Seven Gables* (1851).

Walter M. Oddie (1808-1865),
Lake Near Lenox, Massachusetts,
 1850, oil on canvas, 36 x 49
 inches, inscribed, lower left:
 Walter M. Oddie/1850. Gift of
 William Wilson Corcoran,
 1869. 69.18



Some Hudson River school paintings recall the private, spiritual encounters with nature found in New England literature. This spiritual tendency in landscape painting culminated around mid-century in works remarkable for their treatment of light. Known today as “luminism,” the style focused on sky, water, and atmospheric effects (see illustration page 38). The crystalline pools, radiant skies, and smouldering sunsets often found in luminist paintings seem to suggest the immanence of God in nature.

Small, quiet landscapes were painted throughout the nineteenth century, but the Hudson River school is best known for its grand, majestic tableaux, whose size and scope reflected the great land and aspirations of America. After mid-century, Frederic Edwin Church and Albert Bierstadt brought this grandiose expression to its climax in paintings characterized by ambitious scope and precise naturalistic detail (see illustrations pages 35, 46).

The negative side of truth to nature was the danger of its becoming prosaic. And in fact, the criticism that some writers leveled against Bierstadt and Church in the 1880s was that their paintings had become mechanical in their precision and empty in their monumentality. Although these theatrical works astounded viewers with panoramic scale and minute natural detail, critics said, they did not edify audiences with a deeper, cosmic meaning. What was the spirituality critics believed should shine through landscape painting? The next chapter addresses the philosophic ramifications of landscape painting by looking at the prevailing ideas about nature in nineteenth-century American thought.

Nature, Progress, and the American Mind

The Europeans who came to settle America were scarcely prepared for the strange country they encountered. Whereas the forests and fields of the Old World had been cleared and cultivated hundreds of years earlier, America remained a dangerous and difficult frontier well into the eighteenth century. Only in the Northeast were there numerous villages and farms, but even these were situated at the edge of vast and threatening forests. As a result of their hardships here, early settlers considered the land their antagonist. They struggled with the dense, matted thickets and rocky soil of New England, thinking only of beating back the menacing wild that surrounded them. It is small wonder that Americans were slow to think of the land in positive aesthetic and moral terms. Even as late as the close of the eighteenth century, writers were repeating the Puritans' hostile phrase "howling wilderness" in describing the untamed natural state of Kentucky.

In the nineteenth century, American attitudes toward nature underwent radical changes, largely through the influence of European ideas brought to this country through imported books and magazines. By the end of the century, the love of nature was not considered an intellectual privilege but the patriotic and religious duty of the entire nation.

One of the first stumbling blocks to be overcome was the influence of the European standard of classical landscape beauty, which prejudiced people against the very unclassical appearance of the American land. The landscape paintings of European artists such as Claude Lorrain defined natural beauty in terms of regularity, symmetry, and order. This ideal influenced the design of English gardens and the landscape descriptions of British poetry and prose. Even the countryside seemed to emulate the classical ideal; in England, the land was organized into blocks of cultivated fields, and on the continent, forests were cleared of underbrush by peasants who used fallen branches as kindling. Obviously, the New World wilderness was too sprawling and raw to be considered beautiful.

Another aesthetic category—that of the sublime—was more relevant to the American land. As formulated by British philosopher Edmund Burke in his widely read treatise *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1759), the sublime experience was triggered by anything having to do with pain or danger, especially those things charac-

terized by obscurity, power, privation, vastness, infinity, or suddenness. These qualities paralyzed the mind with terror and then expanded it to admire this power beyond the human. Examples of sublime scenery in Europe were the Swiss Alps and Italian Apennine Mountains, which uplifted and exhilarated viewers with a sense of wonder and awe. Americans believed their own country's breathtaking wilderness to be even more characteristically sublime (see illustration page 28). Indeed, the overwhelming power of Niagara Falls and the dramatic views from atop mountains in the Catskills and Adirondacks seemed not only sublime but holy—evidence of God's promise of future American greatness.

There were also homely, rural landscapes in America which fell into a third category, the picturesque. In the eighteenth century, British writers had defined picturesque landscapes variously, but they generally agreed that a natural scene was picturesque inasmuch as it resembled landscape paintings, both in composition and in discrete elements such as rustic waterfalls, gnarled tree trunks, and mossy rocks. Picturesque scenes abounded in the half-wild, half-tamed countryside near the Hudson River Valley, and in the 1820s travel books began to point tourists toward them. Imitating the English custom of touring native countryside, American travelers went into the landscape to discuss its sublime, beautiful, and picturesque qualities. They used these categories loosely and often interchangeably, for indeed many painted and natural scenes contained elements of some or all.

* * *

While making landscape tours, American travelers not only saw things that English writers had attuned them to see but also felt in the way they had learned from English essays and poetry. At the root of such essays and poems were German theories of imagination and related processes of the mind. The *Critique of Judgment*, written by the German philosopher Immanuel Kant in 1790, was one of the most important of these analyses. Kant disputed the assumption that beauty and sublimity were tangible qualities and proposed instead that they were subjective sensations of the human mind.

Kant's emphasis on mind was adopted by nineteenth-century Scottish Common Sense philosophers who believed that the appeal of objects resulted directly from the associations these objects invoked in the heart and imagination. Richly allusive monuments filled the European landscape; its ruins, rivers, and mountains had been consecrated by history and celebrated by generations of poets. Thomas Cole drew on such associations in his paintings *The Departure* and *The Return* (1837), allegorical landscapes set in medieval Europe which illustrated the theme of mortality. Most American painters and writers were, like Cole,

Thomas Cole (1801-1848), *The Departure and The Return*, 1837, oil on canvas, 39½ x 63 and 39¾ x 63 inches, *The Departure* inscribed, lower center right: TC/1837, *The Return* inscribed, lower center right: T Cole/1837. Gift of William Wilson Corcoran, 1869. 69.2 and 69.3



entranced by the history-rich climate of Europe, flocking to Italy to study or work for years at a time (see illustration page 44). The absence of such a historical heritage in the raw New World seemed to limit America's aesthetic potential.

But as the Romantic works of English writers William Wordsworth (1770-1850), Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1772-1834), and Thomas Carlyle (1795-1881) were brought to America in the 1820s and 1830s, imagination became increasingly important in the American response to nature. Deriving their ideas from the theories of Kant and other German philosophers, the British Romantics examined the mind's ability to transcend rational limitations by opening itself to nature's deeper, spiritual essence.

In New England, Emerson and his Transcendentalist followers were inspired by German and British Romanticism. They speculated that it was possible to achieve an understanding of the universe by tapping into the spirit, or "Oversoul," which organically unified man, nature, and God. The Transcendentalist belief in the spirituality of the natural world reinforced the tendency of Americans to identify their country's natural wonders with God, and indeed to see the land as God's earthly temple.

* * *

Nature's new significance spawned an enthusiasm for natural history in America. At home, amateur naturalists read lavishly illustrated science texts and pondered the aquariums, fern cases, and shell collections they kept in their drawing rooms. Out of doors, the hobbyists gathered specimens to be examined under the family microscope. One popular novel *Caroline Westerly, or the Young Traveler from Ohio...* (1833) by Elmira H. L. Phelps, described a vacation to Niagara Falls which was devoted to collecting and labeling plant and mineral specimens.

American writers and painters such as Thoreau, Durand, and Church were among the country's most devoted naturalists, for like botanists, geologists, and meteorologists, they considered their purpose to be the search for the universe's true order and the revelation of its plan to others. During their journeys into nature, artists emulated the scientist's technique of close observation, filling their sketchbooks with precise studies of different types of clouds, plants, and water, annotated with notes on time of day, season, and light.

Yet it was not enough simply to record observable facts; painters and writers also instilled a spiritual and moral quality in their finished compositions, for they were looking for signs of God in the land. The spontaneous sketches and descriptive journal notes they made outdoors were later combined to create the desired effect: painters layered cumulous clouds and jagged rocks to evoke drama; tortuous branches and shifting light to represent unrest; crystalline ponds and empty skies to invite reflection and repose. Painters and writers filled their bookshelves with a variety of natural history texts—from the scientific works of Alexander von Humboldt, whom Church revered, to the popular "Ladies'" and children's botanical guides, which Jasper Cropsey's family collected.

The view of nature as God's earthly temple was habitually repeated by nineteenth-century tourists, naturalists, Transcendentalists, painters, and writers. Yet in practice most Americans treated the richly endowed land as a resource to be developed, rather than a divine gift to be enshrined. The popular doctrine of Manifest Destiny proclaimed the inevitability of civilization's coast-to-coast dominion in America, and uncharted territories beckoned American explorers on behalf of "progress." Assaults on the wild were made with confidence and bravado; even men like Bryant, Cooper, and Cole, whose love of nature approached reverence, wrote about the day when utopian American cities would emerge from the wilderness.

So plentiful were the American forests that few people recognized them as exhaustible. Yet as the forces of civilization marched on, the land's primeval sanctity was violated. In the Catskill Mountains, millions of cubic feet of giant hemlock trees

were felled to provide bark for tanning operations, and many more trees were sacrificed to make way for a system of factories in New England. Roads and railroads required further removal of natural obstacles.

As writers and artists became aware of the alarming destruction of the wilderness, an undercurrent of remorse crept into their works. Cole wrote poetry expressing his sadness at finding favorite trees cut down in the name of progress and proposed to write a book which would touch on the "wilderness passing away, and the necessity of saving and perpetuating its features." In Massachusetts, Hawthorne and Thoreau found their quiet contemplations of nature interrupted increasingly by the hooting of passing trains. In *The Pioneers* (1823) Cooper contrasted Leatherstocking—who hunted only for survival and preferred planting to chopping down trees—with the wasteful fishermen, woodchoppers, and riflemen who mutilated and squandered nature. The paradoxically hostile relationship of American progress and the unique American wilderness was a recurring theme in the Leatherstocking Novels.

Nor was this note of nostalgia limited to the East. As fellow painters were recording what was left of the northeastern American wilderness, George Catlin (1796-1872) and Seth Eastman (1808-1875) were documenting the appearance and customs of the American Indians, then considered a dying race. Eastman's *Lacrosse Playing Among the Sioux Indians* (1851) records both an indigenous American game and the look of the landscape in which it was played. By the time Albert Bierstadt painted *The Last of the Buffalo* (1889), images of Indians and buffalo were loaded with the iconography of destruction and shame.

* * *

The last quarter of the nineteenth century saw the apparent triumph of progress over wilderness in America. The growth of cities and industry, and the commercialization of popular scenic attractions such as Niagara Falls, threatened to destroy all that remained of the continent's unique wild nature. In an effort to preserve what remained, wilderness sites were formally planned. In New York City a wooded area was set aside to form Central Park in 1856, twenty years after William Cullen Bryant had suggested that this be done. Other areas followed suit; Yellowstone was made a national park in 1872, and development at Niagara Falls was regulated by an international commission established in 1885.

Today, there is an almost universal American conviction that our wildlife and scenic attractions are national treasures meriting preservation and protection. The origin of this faith is to be found in the nineteenth century, when the ideology of nature was tied almost inextricably to the love of country.

Plates and Commentaries



Thomas Birch (1779-1851)
View of the Delaware Near Philadelphia 1830
Oil on canvas
40 x 60 inches
Inscribed, lower left: Thos Birch/1831
Museum Purchase, 1955 55.83

Hoping to profit from international curiosity about the New World by making views of America's cities and natural wonders, British topographical artists came to the United States in force around the turn of the nineteenth century. It was for this reason that Birch and his father, English engraver and miniaturist William Birch, emigrated to Philadelphia in 1794. Together, they made topographical views of the city. When, after 1806, the younger Birch went on to paint landscapes and seascapes, he retained the tight, linear style he had learned from his father and from his study of Dutch and English prints. Because Birch was using European landscapes as models, his paintings of American scenes bore a resemblance to the Old World, in much the same way that American poems based on British prototypes tended to include references to "happy shade" and "neat enclosure" which had little relevance to the rugged American land.

During this period, and throughout his career, Birch painted scenes of the Delaware River, the natural boundary which separates Pennsylvania from New Jersey and New York. As the terminus of Philadelphia's beloved Schuylkill River and as a conduit for extensive commercial traffic, the Delaware was important in Philadelphia life and also afforded ample opportunities for the marine paintings at which Birch excelled. At its origin in the western Catskill Mountains, the Delaware is quite near the Hudson River, and indeed Dutch explorers had considered the two rivers complementary, calling the Hudson the North River and the Delaware the South River. Yet in appearance these rivers are very different; whereas the extraordinary scenery along the mountainous Hudson is wild and romantic, the level land bounding the Delaware is homely and unexceptional. It yielded early and easily to domestication and by 1815 was marked by roads and cultivated orchards.

No Southern Tour of the Delaware matched the Northern Tour of the Hudson, nor were there grand hotels, guidebooks, or literary legends to immortalize the Delaware as Rip van Winkle and Leatherstocking immortalized landmarks along the Hudson. Yet, as Birch's painting conveys, the Delaware had a rural charm which made it the delight of local residents, if not the mecca of far-flung tourists. Boat trips, picnics, and walks along the Delaware were popular among Philadelphians who, like the well-dressed urbanites in Birch's painting, made nature outings in order to escape the confinement of civilization. Yet in accordance with the taste of their time, they sought a reassuringly cultivated nature, rendered pleasing by picturesque details such as rustic roads, fences, mossy tree stumps, and houses dotting the horizon. Most important of all, fashionable travelers demanded company; the pair of beached boats in Birch's painting indicates that this group of nature-lovers was not altogether alone in the wilderness.



Thomas Doughty (1793-1856)

Autumn on the Hudson 1850

Oil on canvas

34 $\frac{3}{8}$ x 36 $\frac{3}{8}$ inches

Gift of William Wilson Corcoran, 1869 69.70

Philadelphia-born Thomas Doughty was one of America's first native artists officially to designate himself a landscape painter. Doughty was also among the first to recreate specific American locations instead of inventing imaginary landscapes. Though his early works of the 1820s were rendered in a straightforward, topographical way, Doughty eventually developed a style reminiscent of the English picturesque mode, which he may have picked up from European prints or from the examples of Anglo-American landscape painters, such as Thomas Birch and Joshua Shaw, his neighbors in Philadelphia.

Autumn on the Hudson is one of the idyllic, pastoral scenes for which Doughty is best known. The painting's debt to European classical landscapists, such as Claude Lorrain, is clear in its peaceful mood and balanced compositional design, which uses trees to frame the scene and diagonal lines—in the road, the stream, and the mountains—to lead the eye into the painting. Also European in inspiration are the signs of civilization which dot the landscape; in addition to sailboats and resting figures, a quaint country cottage, complete with picket fence, stands as a kind of American substitute for the picturesque ruin ubiquitous in European landscapes.

Yet despite its debt to Old World tradition, *Autumn on the Hudson* is unmistakably an American painting. Its broad scope conveys a sense of that vastness of the American landscape which so impressed Europeans, and the rawness of the wilderness persists in the tangled underbrush of the foreground and the rugged mountains of the background. Most American of all is the season, autumn, rendered especially piquant by patches of red paint, which Doughty felt were necessary to punctuate and balance a painting. Indeed, *Autumn on the Hudson* is remarkable for the variety and brilliance of the colors used. These were rare among the restrained, tonal pictures the artist painted near the end of his career, after his visit to England and settlement in New York City during the late 1830s.



Thomas Cole (1801-1848)
Tornado in an American Wilderness 1831
Oil on canvas
46 $\frac{3}{8}$ x 64 $\frac{5}{8}$ inches
Inscribed, lower center: T. Cole/1831
Museum Purchase, 1877 77.12

Until he was seventeen, Cole lived in bleak Northern England, where he helped support his family by working as a calico designer and engraver's assistant. Perhaps as a respite from the industrial blight of his everyday life, Cole escaped to the countryside as often as he could to hunt for picturesque scenery. Even in these early years, nature was Cole's great inspiration; in its presence he played the flute, wrote poetry, and daydreamed over one of his favorite books—an American travel account, which dazzled him with descriptions of the majestic wilderness across the ocean. In 1818, Cole and his family left England for America, settling in Steubenville, Ohio. After trying a variety of professions, Cole finally apprenticed himself to an itinerant painter in 1823. His progress was rapid; by 1825 he had astonished the principal figures of the New York art world with his unique paintings of the American land.

Though other Englishmen had painted American landscapes after immigrating to this country, none matched Cole's enthusiasm for American nature. When he was not painting, Cole continued to seek out picturesque countryside, recording striking scenery in pencil sketches and poems written on his return home. Cole was especially fascinated by trees, whose gnarled trunks and gesturing branches he likened to human gestures and states of mind. This tendency to associate nature with inherent spiritual qualities was a major influence in Cole's art, for whereas other painters of his period were content merely to document the topography of the land, Cole sought to rise above mere "leaf painting," as he called it, by elevating his landscapes to the level of history painting, endowing them with meaning which often took the form of moral lessons.

The Tornado, a quintessentially Romantic picture, conveys meaning through landscape alone. Its subject is the sublime, which was believed to evoke the strongest emotion the mind is capable of feeling. Indeed, Cole's picture is virtually a point-by-point representation of the sublime as formulated by Edmund Burke: *obscurity* is represented in the darkened sky and windswept confusion of the scene; *power* is manifest in the force of the gusts which sweep the plain; *privation* is exemplified by the solitary, unsheltered figure seen clinging to a tree; and *vastness* is felt in the expansive scene itself. At the same time, the figure experiences the sense of awe in the face of superhuman power which Burke had described as a result of sublime experience. *The Tornado* is a supreme example of what made Cole's paintings remarkable for their time; it goes beyond the mere appearance of the American land to recreate a sense of what it was like to *experience* it. Painted during Cole's 1829-32 sojourn abroad, and exhibited at the Society of British Artists in 1831, *The Tornado* may have been intended to startle English viewers with a violent image of the awesome American wilderness.



John Frederick Kensett (1816-1872)
Autumn Afternoon on Lake George 1864
 Oil on canvas
 48¾ x 72½ inches
 Museum Purchase, 1877 77.11



Andrew Fisher Bunner (1841-1897)
Picnic Party at Lake George 1874
 Oil on canvas
 29¼ x 23¼ inches
 Inscribed, lower right:
 A. F. Bunner 1874
 Museum Purchase, 1981 1981.9

Like Durand, Kensett began his artistic career as an engraver, designing vignettes for bank notes and postage stamps. Though he exhibited a landscape painting in 1838 at the National Academy of Design, it was not until he came under the spell of the English countryside during his 1840-47 sojourn in Europe that he painted landscapes in earnest. On his return to America, Kensett traveled widely in search of striking scenery. It did not take him long to discover Lake George, nestled between Lake Champlain and the Hudson River in the southeastern corner of New York's Adirondack region. Kensett visited the lake for the first time in 1848, accompanied, as in Europe, by his friend John Casilear and his mentor Durand. He returned to the lake throughout his career to sketch its gleaming waters, bounded by great mountain walls and specked with tiny islands.

Not only was Lake George a beautiful natural spot, it was also a center for tourism. There, modish vacationers stayed in enormous luxury hotels where they played croquet and tennis to the strains of an orchestra at the edge of the lake. It was even possible to monitor the Wall Street ticker tape from this haven in the Adirondacks. Lake George's popularity among tourists created a tremendous demand for paintings; indeed, scenes of Lake George were the bread and butter of many artists, who made it the most frequently painted resort in America at mid-century. Virtually all members of the Hudson River school came to paint Lake George, but Kensett remains the one particularly associated with the area. Reputedly the most popular and genial Hudson River school artist, Kensett seems to have had a natural attraction to the merry atmosphere of this resort. In *Autumn Afternoon on Lake George* (1864), he peopled the shores with strolling travelers and dotted the lake with boats. Yet he concentrated on the glorious autumn foliage and placid beauty of the scene. A closer documentation of the Lake's prevailing social tone is Andrew Bunner's painting *Picnic Party at Lake George* (1874), in which a small party gathers on the edge of the water, probably intent on the courtship and romantic flirtations for which the summer resorts were known. This view was taken from Barke's Pond, near the Northwest Bay and Tongue Mountain.

Whereas the nearby resorts of Ballston Spa and Saratoga Springs, New York, lured travelers with their curative waters, Lake George was known for scenic beauty and historic interest alone. Indeed, the history of Lake George was immensely rich; it included Indian kidnappings, French and English battles, buried treasure, miraculously disappearing snakes, and island-bound hermits. In 1826 James Fenimore Cooper incorporated these Lake George legends in *The Last of the Mohicans*, perhaps his best-known historical novel. Structuring his narrative around well-known landmarks, such as Glens Falls and Bloody Pond, Cooper recreated the aboriginal mood and appearance of Lake George and the Adirondack Mountains. Later in the century, travelers continued to see the area through Cooper's eyes, half believing in the events the author had located there. In fact, many people called Lake George "Horicon," the pseudo-Indian name coined in *The Last of the Mohicans*. Cooper claimed that Horicon meant "Silver Water," a reference to the shimmering appearance of the pellucid lake.

Lake George guidebooks, written to correspond with steamboat tours up the lake, pinpointed the picturesque islands and hills where historic and legendary events were to have occurred. After cataloguing the gory details of past battles, the guidebooks contrasted former violence with the present peacefulness of Lake George, reminding readers that through these woods Natty Bumppo had slipped along silently while evading his deadly enemies. It was the peace of Lake George which inspired Kensett and led to such picturesque visions as *Autumn Afternoon on Lake George*.



Jasper F. Cropsey (1823-1900)

View of Mount Washington 1881

Oil on canvas glued to masonite

24 x 44 $\frac{1}{8}$ inches

Inscribed, lower right: Mount Washington/ from near
Bartletts./J.F.C. Sept. 18th 1852.

Gift of Mr. and Mrs. John C. Newington, 1977 1977.41

John Frederick Kensett (1816-1872)

Sketch of Mount Washington 1851

Oil on canvas

11 $\frac{3}{8}$ x 20 inches

Inscribed, lower right: J.F.K. 51

Gift of William Wilson Corcoran, 1869 69.74

At the center and summit of the great White Mountains of New Hampshire is Mount Washington, the highest peak in New England. Landscape painters were led to the White Mountains by Thomas Cole and Thomas Doughty, who visited there in the late 1820s. John Frederick Kensett spent the summer of 1850 hiking and sketching his way through the countryside in the company of John Casilear and Benjamin Champney. In subsequent years, the quiet farmhouse at which they stayed became an increasingly popular base for vacationing New York artists, and the deserted meadows where they wandered were soon dotted with sketching artists, including Jasper Cropsey, Sanford Robinson Gifford, Albert Bierstadt, and Frederic Church.

The arduous climb to the top of Mount Washington was a requisite part of the White Mountain vacation, yet artists rarely sketched or painted from this supreme vantage point. Not only was their view often obscured by the mountain's violent summer snowstorms and low hanging clouds but the scene itself, though impressive, was too extensive and maplike to make a pleasing picture; Cole wrote that his ascent of nearby Mount Chocurua was suitable for thoughts, not sketches, and accordingly, Kensett, Cropsey, and other artists in the Mount Washington area focused on picturesque views from the valley, with the great mountain seen in the distance.

Alongside artists, writers swelled the wave of White Mountain tourism which transformed the area's residents into innkeepers. Between 1831 and 1836, Hawthorne, Emerson, Irving, Longfellow, and Daniel Webster all stayed at Ethan Crawford's modest hostelry near Mount Washington. In 1839 Thoreau and his brother climbed the mountain and toured the surrounding area. It was this trip that Thoreau commemorated in *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers* (1849), the book he wrote in the seclusion of Walden Pond.

Hawthorne, though most closely identified with his native Massachusetts, spent his teenage years in a quiet woodland hamlet near Maine's Sebago Lake, with the glittering White Mountains looming to the northwest. As a boy he knew Mount Washington to be the home of Manitou, the great spirit of the Indians, who was supposed to bring death to all who trespassed on the sacred mountain. Heedless of Indian legend, the adult Hawthorne joined the ranks of adventurous tourists from nearby Boston, Philadelphia, and New York in climbing to Mount Washington's snow-covered peak. There they could register their names on a lead plaque and examine mementoes placed at the summit by earlier climbers. Hawthorne later added five of his psychologically complex tales to the mountain's lore. Published collectively as *Tales of the White Mountains* (1877), these stories reinterpreted the familiar features of the White Mountains in an eerie, ironic light, recapturing that haunting presence which the young Hawthorne had sensed in the distant, crystalline hills.



Frederic Edwin Church (1826-1900)

Niagara 1857

Oil on canvas

42½ x 90½ inches

Inscribed, lower right: F. E. Church 1857

Museum Purchase, 1876 76.15

By the mid-nineteenth century, Niagara Falls was the most popular natural spectacle in North America. It attracted over 60,000 visitors each year, many of whom reached it as the final destination of their fashionable Northern Tour. At the Falls, they struck out in search of the sublime experience, surveying the great cataract from the Canadian as well as the American side, climbing up and down scenic stairways, and testing various other dramatic vantage points, such as Table Rock, a precarious ledge at the brink of the Falls, 160 feet above the Niagara Gorge. Effusive accounts appeared in newspapers and journals like the *New York Mirror* and *The Knickerbocker*, and the cataract inspired poems, journals, and essays by literary figures such as Bryant, Hawthorne, and Cooper, and artists including Cole, whose "Essay on American Scenery" (1836) underscored the sublimity of this "vast inland sea."

Niagara was unquestionably the climactic landscape of the entire American continent. Its rushing water seemed to represent the limitless resources of America, the Falls' very presence to offer proof of God's high purpose for this country. Indeed, by visiting Niagara Falls, nineteenth-century travelers were essentially going to the heart of America itself. It was there that Thomas Cole, before going abroad, impressed on his mind the quintessential image of New World wilderness, steeling himself against the corrupting influence of the Old World.

Although Niagara was painted by almost every landscape artist active at mid-century, none of them captured the effect of the Falls' physical awesomeness and spiritual power better than Frederic Church. His image of the Horseshoe Fall on the Canadian side combined staggering scale, scientifically precise detail, and a compellingly horizontal composition to produce the most popular visual image of the century. During the year he worked on his unique conception, Church visited the Falls three times and made numerous sketches which became the bases for this and two other major pictures of Niagara. The sketches are studies of vantage points, of details such as Goat Island (visible in the left background of this painting), of the Falls' hydraulics, and of the light and tonality of its sky, water, and land. Preserved in their greatest number at the Cooper-Hewitt Museum in New York City, they reveal the extensive process by which Church developed his provocative vision of the Falls.

Niagara was first exhibited in the spring of 1857 at a commercial gallery in New York, where unprecedented crowds marveled at it. The painting was then sent to London where it again received unqualified praise, including that of critic John Ruskin. It then toured throughout Great Britain and the American South, and it was later shown at the Paris Exposition Universelle of 1867, where it won a medal. Considered the best picture ever produced in this country, the painting was reproduced as a color lithograph by Williams, Stevens, and Williams, the owners of the gallery on Broadway where it was first exhibited, who had purchased reproduction rights. Eventually, small versions of Church's painting decorated thousands of American homes. Other scenic views of Niagara adorned everything from wallpaper and theatre curtains to sheet music. But it was this most democratic of images by Church which captured the hearts and minds of Americans, answering Ralph Waldo Emerson's call for an artist who would give convincing shape to the presence of the sacred on earth.



Martin Johnson Heade (1819-1904)

View of Marshfield 1865-70

Oil on canvas

15 $\frac{3}{8}$ x 30 $\frac{1}{4}$ inches

Inscribed, lower right face: M J Heade

Museum purchase, 1981 1981.61

In 1859 Heade took a studio in New York's Tenth Street Studio Building, which, for the next two decades, would be the center of American landscape painting. By 1865, the building was occupied by Frederic Church, Sanford Gifford, John Kensett, Worthington Whittredge, Albert Bierstadt, and others. In such company, Heade was able to absorb the lessons of the Hudson River school style of painting.

But while many of his colleagues were painting the same well-known American spots, such as Lake George, Niagara Falls, and the Hudson Valley, Heade turned instead to the anonymous marshlands of the Eastern seaboard. For the rest of his life, Heade studied these seemingly flat, undistinguished terrains, painting over one hundred images of them in all, first in Massachusetts, Rhode Island, and Connecticut, and then in New Jersey and Florida. His favorite area seems to have been the one depicted here—the marshes around Newburyport, Massachusetts, in the northeast corner of the state—and his finest marsh pictures date from the late 1860s when he resided in New York and continued to visit the Newbury marshes.

Heade drew a highly artistic dialogue from this singular vista, and *View of Marshfield* possesses many standard characteristics of his marshland imagery. The composition is organized in rhythmic planes: the flat marsh, cut by a narrow, winding river; the sliver of shore and tide at the horizon; and the broad expanse of sky, which sets the atmosphere and tonality of the work. Other elements—a boat, some cattle, a house, and two very small figures in the center—suggest human presence in this otherwise empty terrain. But the focal point of the painting is the haystack to the right of center and its successors, whose diminishing sizes lead the eye out to sea. Each year, during the one- to two-week marsh season, the marsh grasses were mowed, gathered, and stacked on large stakes like those visible at the bottom of the painting's central haystack. The stacked grasses might stand for several months before being hauled away and used for fodder or straw.

Heade's marsh pictures are extraordinary studies of the ever-changing light and atmosphere of the coast, where a few minutes' wait could produce an entirely new scene for him. Among Heade's many canvases of the marsh are depictions at sunrise and twilight, in mist, rain, and sunshine, and under cloudy skies, as we see here. Because of its strong horizontal composition, its sensitivity to light, and its intense connection between viewer and nature, this painting and others like it are often referred to as "luminist." They can also be called "transcendental," for they visually represent the idea of immanent spirituality within nature which had been written about throughout the century, both here and abroad, and which found its most heightened expression in the Transcendentalists of New England.



Asher B. Durand (1796-1886)

Edge of the Forest 1871

Oil on canvas

78½ x 64 inches

Signed, bottom right: A. B. Durand/1871

Museum Purchase, 1874 74.7

When Asher B. Durand completed *Edge of the Forest* in 1871, he had been considered a major figure in the Hudson River school of landscape painting for over thirty years. He was then seventy-five and would live until the age of ninety, eclipsing the lifetimes of his colleagues and fellow devotees of nature, William Cullen Bryant and Thomas Cole. The relationship among these three men is well documented. It began in the 1820s in New York, where Cole and Bryant met after each had just moved to the city, and where Durand befriended them at the Bread and Cheese Club. Among many other connections, and, underlying the individualities of their work, they shared a belief in the sanctity of nature and the artist's duty to reveal nature as a source of communion between God and mankind.

Edge of the Forest, a meditative woodland scene, reflects this spiritual value. Here, we seem to stand with the artist inside a forest grove. A dense group of trees arches overhead. Before them, the floor of the forest is strewn with rocks and fallen branches and refreshed by a stream; through a clearing, distant mountains beckon behind a lake and beneath a tranquil sky. In its prevailing sense of peace and protection, *Edge of the Forest* attests to Durand's belief in the restorative powers of nature. At the same time, in its naturalistic image of the woodland interior, this painting speaks of Durand's most important contribution to his field: the appreciation of nature's "physiognomy."

An engraver for almost twenty-five years, Durand had turned to painting in the 1830s and to landscape at the end of the decade under Cole's influence. At about the same time he began to make studies of nature, which he produced in impressive numbers throughout the rest of his career. They are unique in their freshness and immediacy, as well as in their careful delineation of the textures and forms of nature. In 1844, Durand began to make oil studies of nature working directly from his subject out-of-doors. He was the first American artist to do this, and his plein-air studies of trees were of such accurate expression that they were called "portraits." A client's request for one of these oil studies occasionally specified the species to be represented—black birch, pine, hemlock, beech.

During the winter months, Durand used his studies as models for studio paintings. According to the artist's son, John Durand, his father composed *Edge of the Forest* at his country studio in Maplewood, New Jersey, from his most important outdoor sketches. Informed by a humanized, picturesque sensibility rather than the sublime aesthetic that most interested Cole, the painting attests to Durand's love for the woodland haunts he so often walked, recording their endless variety with a vigor that would influence naturalist trends among the next generation of American landscape practitioners.



Worthington Whittredge (1820-1910)

Trout Brook in the Catskills c. 1875

Oil on canvas

35½ x 48⅞ inches

Inscribed, lower left: W. Whittredge

Museum Purchase, 1875 75.5

Trout Brook in the Catskills recalls Whittredge's close ties to the Hudson River school. Like Asher B. Durand's *Edge of the Forest* (see illustration page 40), it depicts a woodland interior, and here, nature's embrace is even more thorough. For while clearings are hinted at by the light streaming onto the banks of the brook, there is no far vista. Instead, trees envelop this spot, recreating the hushed tonal environment of the very center of the forest. The mood, as in Durand's painting, is tranquil, its serenity expressed in the smooth brook, the enclosure of trees, and the softly filtered light for which Whittredge's woodland idylls were well known.

Not surprisingly, Whittredge's images of his native country first developed under the spell of Durand's example. After a decade of work and study in Europe beginning in 1849, Whittredge settled in New York in 1860. There, the emerging aesthetic of a definite, American landscape style affected him deeply. Immediately after arriving in the city he went to see Durand's *Thanatopsis*, the landscape painting inspired by Bryant's poem of that name. In his autobiography, written at the age of eighty-five, Whittredge recalls being profoundly moved by the native qualities of this painting. Within a few months he had obtained a space in the Tenth Street Studio Building, where he quickly became part of the Hudson River school painters' circle. He absorbed their style firsthand and, in their company, worked toward his goal of making distinctively American nature scenes.

Whittredge spent the summers between 1860 and 1866 in the Catskills, often joined by Durand, Kensett, Casilear, Gifford, and others. They traveled there in the usual fashion, taking a steamer up the Hudson River and then a horse-drawn carriage into the countryside. For a long time, Whittredge's landscape sense was colored by his ten years in Europe. In his autobiography he recalls roaming the Catskills, pencil in hand, unable to make sense of what appeared to be a tangled mess of underbrush. Gradually, under the influence of his colleagues, Whittredge adjusted his expectations of the American wilderness. Within several years his views of the Catskills' deep forests and untouched interiors replete with freshwater streams drew the same appreciative breath as the most lyrical Hudson River imagery.

Whittredge's landscapes, however, are not all romance. Both his sketches and his studio paintings possess the qualities of texture and detail that speak of close observation and reliance on nature itself. Indeed, the call back to nature voiced by Durand in his eight "Letters on Landscape Painting" (1855), published in *The Crayon*, was important to Whittredge. *Trout Brook*, with its sensitive delineations of rocks, water, and foliage, as well as its evocation of natural light, brings Durand's ideas and practices to mind.



Sanford Robinson Gifford (1823-1880)

The Ruins of the Parthenon 1880

Oil on canvas

27 $\frac{5}{8}$ x 53 $\frac{3}{8}$ inches

Inscribed, lower left: S. R. Gifford 1880

Museum purchase, 1881 81.7

Europeans described their visits to the United States as trips into the future. By contrast, Americans visiting Europe felt they were making a journey into the past. Profoundly aware of their own country's lack of history, American travelers flocked to the well-known castles, cathedrals, and ruins of the Old World, enriching their letters and journals with literary and historical references. Travel abroad was particularly important for American painters, for in England they were able to participate in an art community which was more highly esteemed and vital than the American art world, and in Italy they could see, and learn from, the famous works of Old Masters.

Unlike most of his colleagues, Gifford was well prepared for what he saw in England and Italy during his first trip (1857-59). Having studied his brother's collection of European engravings as a boy, he claimed to feel quite at home among the originals. On his second trip abroad (1868-69), Gifford visited more exotic locales including Egypt, Jerusalem, Lebanon, Syria, and Turkey. He also spent nine days in Athens during May 1869. There, Gifford seems to have been most intrigued with the Parthenon. He measured the building and noted the curvature and spacing of its columns.

Looking back on this trip eleven years later, Gifford painted *The Ruins of the Parthenon*, probably based on sketches and notes made in 1869. It is tempting to see this painting as Gifford's nostalgic remembrance of his sojourn in the Old World. Not only does it depict the archetypal source of European art, the Acropolis, immersed in the glowing atmosphere identified with Europe, but it includes an autobiographical reference to the artist himself in the figure who kneels intently before a bit of pediment. This figure, and the patient native guide who accompanies him, were also included in the painting's preparatory oil sketch, now at The Century Association in New York.

According to Gifford's account, *The Ruins of the Parthenon* was not to be a portrait of a building but a picture of a day, and indeed, the painting is most remarkable for the rosy, shimmering atmosphere which pervades it. In his lifetime, Gifford was both commended and criticized for his absorption with the effects of light; his landscape style is still referred to as "air painting," and the glowing luminosity of his landscapes have led some art historians to connect Gifford with the mid-century style they call "luminism." Rather than a disparate movement, luminism seems a continuation of the landscape aesthetic which developed in America in the nineteenth century. The luminist qualities in this rarefied impression of Europe's historical landscape also pervade Church's grand, theatrical paintings and Heade's small, quiet meditations on the New England landscape (see illustrations pages 35, 38).



Albert Bierstadt (1830-1902)

Mount Corcoran 1875-77

Oil on canvas

61 x 96¼ inches

Inscribed, lower right: ABierstadt

Museum purchase 1878 78.1

When Bierstadt made his first trip West in April 1859, he accompanied Colonel Frederick Lander and a team of engineers sent to survey a proposed railroad through Wyoming. Bierstadt made sketches along the way, which he brought back east with him to the Tenth Street Studio Building in New York, where he composed monumental paintings of the western frontier.

Closely identified with the American West despite his New England roots, (he grew up in New Bedford, Massachusetts), Bierstadt enjoyed great celebrity in the 1860s and 1870s. His paintings catered to the tremendous curiosity aroused on the east coast by popular press accounts of the Rocky Mountains and Sierra Nevada. Indeed, Bierstadt's works served as climactic realizations of these reports; when his painting *Rocky Mountains* (1863) was first exhibited in New York City, it was very much a public event, with excited crowds flocking to the gallery and banners overhanging Broadway.

One of the most publicized western news stories of the 1870s was the climbing of California's Mount Whitney—the highest mountain in the United States—by geologist Clarence King. After King wrote a book describing his feat, it was discovered that the mountain was not Mount Whitney at all, but a neighboring peak. During the ensuing controversy, Bierstadt capitalized on Mount Whitney's new notoriety by diligently executing a number of paintings of it. The central peak in *Mount Corcoran*, which dates from this time, closely resembles Bierstadt's contemporaneous images of Mount Whitney. Moreover, when this painting was exhibited at the National Academy of Design in 1877, it wasn't "Mount Corcoran" at all, but *Mountain Lake*. Since Bierstadt had bestowed names on mountains in the past—he named one for Colonel Lander and another for his future wife, Rosalie Ludlow—it is thought that he conveniently renamed this one before trying to persuade William Wilson Corcoran to buy the painting for his museum. *Mount Corcoran* exemplifies the kind of mountainous western landscape for which Bierstadt was known and esteemed. Theatrical in composition and monumental in size, the painting allows viewers to experience a sense of the grandeur of the West. It also seems to reflect the optimism which fueled America's expansion across the continent in the nineteenth century.

Bierstadt was more interested in documenting the appearance of the West than in making profound moral or spiritual statements, however. His paintings were not to be interpreted in the way that the deeply resonant works of Cole and Church were. Rather, Bierstadt's paintings were to be examined for the information they imparted. This end was realized through Bierstadt's attention to minute details and by the keen skills of draftsmanship he had acquired while studying in Düsseldorf, Germany, from 1853 to 1855.

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